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SUBJECT: SARKOZY ALLY ON CHIRAC'S ISOLATION AND SARKOZY'S  
SEARCH FOR EARLY OUT FROM VILLEPIN GOVERNMENT

REF: A. (A) EMBASSY PARIS DAILY REPORT FOR 02JUN06

- 1B. (B) EMBASSY PARIS DAILY REPORT FOR 30MAY06 AND  
31MAY06
- 1C. (C) PARIS 3426
- 1D. (D) PARIS 3178

Classified By: Ambassador Craig Stapleton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

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11. (C) Over lunch on June 1 with Ambassador Stapleton, center-right candidate for mayor of Paris and Sarkozy ally Francoise de Panafieu gave a somber portrait of President Chirac's growing isolation. She conveyed Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) legislators' growing apprehension that the public's unhappiness with President Chirac and Prime Minister de Villepin will be taken out on UMP candidates in the next legislative elections. As Chirac's clout diminishes, she said, "a government with two leaders (Villepin and Sarkozy) who hate each other" was becoming ever more untenable, and Sarkozy was increasingly searching for the right moment to leave the government. Panafieu expressed her admiration for center-left presidential hopeful Segolene Royal's skills as a politician, while also expressing reservations about Royal's personality. Panafieu said Royal had been masterful in understanding ordinary citizens' feeling that they are excluded from meaningful political participation, and then positioning herself as a candidate "who listens first" and "promises participation" in the policies subsequently pursued. (Panafieu's views on the Clearstream affair and on President Chirac's pardon of French International Olympic Committee member Guy Drut were reported in ref A.) END  
SUMMARY

Chirac: Ever More "Isolated"

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12. (C) Panafieu drew a sober portrait of President Chirac's growing "isolation" as the reins of power slip from his fingers. Panafieu, who was a key member of Chirac's team during his years as mayor of Paris (1977 - 1995), said "nobody sees him anymore." She explained that though Chirac is constantly seen at working meetings and events by all sorts of people -- high officials and collaborators, including herself, in her capacity as mayor of Paris' 17th district and a member of the National Assembly -- fewer and fewer people see him "regularly." A regularly reprised conversation, according to Panafieu, is necessary for the trust and intimacy without which no one dares to speak the truth to power. "It's just very difficult," Panafieu said,

"to tell the President of the Republic, cold turkey like that, that such and such is just not working."

¶13. (C) Panafieu had no suggestions for how Chirac might regain the public's trust. After 11 years in power, many missed opportunities to tackle France's big problems and little to point to as a lasting legacy, Chirac seemed trapped in a mime of the role of president, no longer acting like a vigorous head of state and dominant figure on the political scene. Poignantly, Panafieu acknowledged that Chirac no longer had the clout to impose himself over Interior Minister Sarkozy and Prime Minister Villepin. She expressed the hope that the return to France of former prime minister Alain Juppe, after a year of teaching in Canada, would provide Chirac with a much-needed trusted peer able to deliver unbiased, unvarnished advice.

#### Sarkozy Looking for an Exit

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¶14. (C) Panafieu intimated that Sarkozy would be leaving the government sooner than expected. (Note: After he joined the Villepin government a year ago, Sarkozy made clear that he would be leaving the government "probably in January" 2007 to devote himself full time to campaigning for the presidency. End Note.) According to Panafieu, a combination of factors -- the Clearstream affair (refs C and D) that has injected new venom into the relationship between Sarkozy and Villepin, Sarkozy's fear that Villepin's free fall in the polls will soon pull Sarkozy's ratings down too, and the public's assessment of Chirac's presidency as a whole and of the Villepin government in particular as deeply disappointing failures -- are spurring Sarkozy to advance the timetable for his departure. Panafieu hesitated, almost as if she were about to reveal an imminent Sarkozy departure, but -- ruefully commenting on PolOffs' note taking -- said instead,

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"I can't tell you any more."

#### UMP Legislators Fearful of the Electoral Consequences

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¶15. (C) Panafieu said that the UMP members of parliament (Panafieu is also a member of the National Assembly) were worried that the public's negative views of Chirac and Villepin could rub off on them and stick, all the way through to the next legislative elections now scheduled for June 2007. (Note: The current electoral calendar calls for the presidential election (two rounds, April and May 2007) followed by legislative elections (June 2007), and then municipal and cantonal elections (March 2008) and Senatorial elections (September 2008). End Note.)

¶16. (C) Panafieu characterized the most recent meeting of UMP legislators with Villepin and members of the government as one where "we weren't speaking our minds; when that happens among ourselves, it's a very bad sign." Apparently what was on legislators' minds, and not being spoken about, is that the popular backlash against Chirac and Villepin, which could sweep a candidate of change into the presidency (including, possibly, UMP president Sarkozy), could also sweep out of office a large number of UMP members of the National Assembly.

#### Panafieu on Royal

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¶17. (C) Panafieu expressed great admiration for Royal's astuteness as a politician, while expressing certain reservations about Royal's personality. Panafieu said Royal had so far been masterful in timing her emergence into the presidential race and building up her image. Panafieu -- favorably comparing Royal's methods to her own -- praised Royal for her commitment to grass roots politics, tirelessly appearing before small groups of voters, taking their questions and "confronting their concerns." "That's what it's all about," Panafieu said, evoking the exhausting joys of being a professional politician deeply committed to representative democracy. Panafieu also praised Royal for

"recognizing the thirst for participation," among voters, and for following through by being careful to always "listen first," and then make proposals.

NEAR ADULATION OF NICOLAS SARKOZY

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¶8. (C) Panafieu followed her remarks about Royal with an assessment of Nicolas Sarkozy as a "one of the few political figures able to infuse others with the belief that politicians can make a real difference for the better...whenever I get discouraged, I go see Nicholas and get a shot in the arm of conviction and determination." Panafieu praised Sarkozy's strategy of consolidating his base on the right before moving to the center, and said it was more likely to be successful than Royal's "risky" strategy of wooing the undecided first. Panafieu noted that Royal needed to be selected (by the PS) before she could be elected.

COMMENT

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¶9. (C) Last February, Panafieu easily defeated three other contenders in the UMP's first primary to select a candidate for the 2008 mayoral race in Paris. A popular local politician and authoritative public speaker, Panafieu is expected to mount a serious challenge to socialist Bertrand Delanoe's expected reelection bid. Despite her victory in the primary, rumors emerged several weeks ago suggesting that Panafieu could be asked to step aside by UMP party officials in order to allow Dominique de Villepin his first opportunity to run for public office. These rumors died away, however, following the withdrawal of the CPE law and the revelation of Villepin's presumed role in the Clearstream affair. Panafieu expects to begin serious campaigning in September 2007, and is clearly determined to become the next mayor of Paris.

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